

summer

fall
winter
spring

*a time of restoration and renewal,
and for finding our way back to joy*

Slowing Down to Listen

This story actually begins back in June, with the first day of summer vacation.

I'm sitting on the porch of our cabin listening to the rain on the tin roof and watching it fall on all my plans for the day. I cannot hike. I cannot do chores. I cannot fish. The mud is so deep, I cannot drive anywhere. I'm trapped. Pinned down. With myself and God. There is nothing I can do but pay attention to what surfaces inside of me when I cannot charge into the day. I *am* paying attention, my journal on my lap, and this is what I begin to write:

I am tweaked again.

Royally friggin' tweaked.

I'm so tired and wrung, my body hurts from being tired.

Or hurts at the first chance to let down and be tired.

Granted, it has been a hard year. So much going on, so much

required. But God is after something. As I journal, I feel like a prisoner writing his confession.

And I know why I'm tweaked.

I'm tweaked from pushing.

Pushing, pushing, always pushing.

This pushing is such a way of life for me, I barely know how to live otherwise. I'm always working on something. Trying to make life better for me or for someone else. It feels like I heave myself at life. Always looking for some way to improve things. I come up here to the ranch to rest, and in the first ten minutes of quiet, here is where my mind goes: *I ought to teach Sam how to cast a fly rod. We ought to finish that back fence. I ought to work with the horses every day we are here. I could paint the door now. Better look at that topo map for my trip with Luke in August. Make a plan.*

Jesus, have mercy.

This rain is a mercy. I am forced to stop. With a bit of pouting, I begin to accept that this deluge is from God. I cannot live my life like this—always working on something. Trying to make life better. Pushing. It's the first day of my vacation, but I can't enjoy it because of the condition I'm in. And I did this to myself. I'm frayed like an old rope because of the way I live my life. And I've got a pretty good sense that this isn't the life God would have me live. I'm pretty sure there isn't a verse that goes, "He leadeth me to utter exhaustion; he runneth me ragged." In fact, doesn't Jesus say something about his yoke is easy and his burden light? Maybe I have some other yoke on me than the yoke of Christ.

Did I really need to take all those trips this year? *Really?* Did I really have to come through for everyone I felt compelled to come through for? *Really?* Here is the embarrassing question: did

I even ask God about those things? Now, I know, I know—our lives seem so inevitable. There's always a reason. There's always a defense. "But I *have* to live like this! If I didn't carry the world on my shoulders—who would?"

Drip. Drip. Drip. This downpour shows no signs of letting up. It is as persistent as the Spirit behind it.

Trapped on the porch, I know the issue is far bigger than this vacation. I know that full well. The issue is the way I live my life. And forced for a few moments to stop, I also know that I don't want to live like this. The very things I'm doing to try to make life happen—all those things that feel so inevitable and unavoidable—are draining me and preventing me from finding the life God offers. If you're about to run out of gas, the best thing to do is slow way down to conserve fuel so that you can make it to the next station. What I do is gun it. Put the pedal to the metal. No wonder God had to *command* us to rest. We wouldn't do it otherwise. Even with the command, we don't really do it.

Sitting here on the porch with God, I return to what I have forgotten—that there is a *life* out of which everything else flows. A life that comes to us from God. Jesus gave us the example of the vine and the branches. He is the vine, we the branches (John 15:5). The essential point of the imagery is that *life* flows from the vine through the branches, and only then do we get fruit. The branches are merely channels. They cannot make abundance happen. The branches need life to bring forth all the joy those grapes offer—the feasting, the wine, the merrymaking after the harvest. That life does not exist in the branches themselves. They—we—have to get it from another source. From God.

Now, rest is just one of the ways we receive the life of God. We stop, set all of our busyness down, and allow ourselves to be

replenished. This is supposed to happen regularly. The original prescription was weekly. So why does rest feel like a luxury? Seriously, it feels irresponsible. We think we can drive ourselves like oxen fifty weeks a year, resurrect in a two-week vacation, then go back and do it all again. That is madness. My pushing and striving cut me off from the life I so desperately need. I don't even think to stop and ask, *Is this what you'd have me do, Lord? Do you want me to paint the bathroom? Volunteer at church? Stay late at work?*

So God sends this downpour to keep me from squandering my vacation by running like a greyhound. He loves me too much to leave me to my own devices.

I'm back to the shepherd and the sheep. When the sheep follow the shepherd, they find pasture. They find life. Life doesn't just magically come to us. We have to make ourselves available to it. There is a lifestyle that allows us to receive the life of God. I know that if I will live more intimately with Jesus and follow his voice, I will have a much better chance of finding the life I long for. I know it. If I will listen to his voice and let him set the pace, if I will cooperate in my transformation, I will be a much happier man. And so a new prayer has begun to rise within me. I am asking God, *What is the life you want me to live?*

If we can get an answer to that question, it will change everything.

On Learning to Listen

We are invited to become followers of Jesus.

Not just believers. *Followers*. There is a difference.

Follower assumes that someone else is doing the leading. As

in “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. . . . He goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice” (John 10:3–4). The Bible invites us to an intimacy with God that will lead us to the life we are meant to live. *If we will follow him. “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; / I will counsel you and watch over you”* (Psalm 32:8). God promises to guide us in the details of our lives. In fact, the psalm continues, “Do not be like the horse or the mule, / which have no understanding / but must be controlled by bit and bridle / or they will not come to you” (v. 9).

What would it be like to yield to Christ in the details of our lives? What would it be like to follow his counsel and instruction in all the small decisions that add up to the life we find ourselves living?

It would be . . . amazing.

I think we would find ourselves saying, as David did, “You have made known to me the path of life” (Psalm 16:11). This is the privilege and the joy of sheep that belong to a good shepherd. He leads them well. He leads them to life. So, back to the question, *What is the life you want me to live?* It is a good question—maybe one of the most important questions we could ever bring to God. He created us, after all. He knows why. He knows what is best for each of us. If we could learn from him the life he wants us to live—the details, the pace of life, the places we are to invest ourselves and the places we are not to—we would be in his will. And there we would find life.

But it’s too big a question to ask. I find I have to start with something smaller.

This weekend, the first of our summer vacation, my simple question was, *What would you have us do: should we go to the ranch*

or stay home? (The ranch for us is a place of rest and restoration. At least that's what it is supposed to be.) I knew I had to start there, with one simple question.

This is step one in learning to listen to the voice of God: ask simple questions. You cannot start with huge and desperate questions, such as, "Should I marry Ted?" or "Do you want me to sell the family business tomorrow?" or "Do I have lung cancer?" (Paranoia rarely enables me to hear God's voice.) That's like learning to play the piano by starting with Mozart, learning to ski by doing double black diamonds. There is way too much emotion involved, too much swirling around in our heads. I find that to hear the voice of God, we must be in a posture of quiet surrender. Starting with small questions helps us learn to do that.

Remember the story of the prophet Elijah after his triumph on Mount Carmel? He ran and hid in a cave. And there God spoke to him.

The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. (1 Kings 19:11–12)

A gentle whisper. "A still small voice," as some translations have it. To hear that gentle whisper, we have to settle down. Shut out all the drama. Quiet our hearts. Now, as we grow in our personal holiness, we can be quiet and surrendered even in the major

questions. But that takes time, and maturity. Don't ask that of yourself as you are starting out. Begin with simple questions. I can sit quietly with the question, *What do you want for this weekend: should we go to the ranch or stay home?* It's not a life-and-death matter. I am not desperately hoping to hear what I secretly want to hear. There is not a great deal of drama around it.

What I'll do is sit with the question before God for several minutes. To help me stay present to God and not begin to wander (*Did I take the socks out of the dryer? Is tomorrow the phone call with my publisher? Where did I leave my cell phone?*), I will repeat the question quietly in my heart. *God, do you want us to go to the ranch or stay home?* I am settling myself before God. *Do you want us to go to the ranch or stay home?* Settle down and be present to God. Pause and listen. Repeat the question. *Should we go to the ranch or stay home? What is your counsel?*

And while I am doing this, I am also noticing my heart's posture on the matter. Am I willing to hear whatever it is God wants to say? That is absolutely critical. If I can only hear an answer that agrees with what I want to hear, then I am not in a posture of surrender to God's will, and it will be hard for me to hear him at all—or to trust what I *do* hear, especially if it is the answer I'm looking for. There is no more decisive issue when it comes to hearing the voice of God than the issue of surrender. Which is beautiful, really. We are drawn to God in search of guidance, but we come away with a deeper holiness because we are learning surrender. Sometimes I will even say as I'm listening, *Lord—I will accept whatever it is you want to say to me.* It helps me bring my soul to a posture of quiet surrender.

So there are the basics: Start with small questions. Repeat the question quietly in your heart to God. Bring yourself to a posture

of quiet surrender. And let me add this—I am assuming we are talking about matters of counsel or guidance that are not directly addressed by Scripture. You don't need to ask God whether or not to commit murder or to run off with your neighbor's television. He already spoke to you about those things. You don't need to ask him if you should rest. He spoke to us about that too. But sometimes we don't know where or when or exactly how to rest, and so we need to seek further direction by listening.

Now, if I don't seem to be able to hear God's voice in that moment, sometimes what I will do is "try on" one answer and then the other. Still in a posture of quiet surrender, I ask the Lord, *Is it yes, you want us to go?* Pause. In my heart I am trying it on, letting it be as though this is God's answer. *We should go?* Pause and listen. *Or is it no, you want us to stay home?* Pause and let this be his answer. *We should stay home?* Pause and listen again.

Quite often we can sense God's direction on a matter before we hear actual words. You may have heard someone use the expression "I had a check in my spirit." It refers to an internal pause, a hesitancy, a sudden reluctance to proceed. The Spirit of God may be impressing you with the will of God by making one answer seem very unappealing or wrong somehow. Arresting you, stopping you. Our spirit is in union with the Spirit of God, and he often makes his will known to us deep within before it forms into words. By "trying on" the possible answers, I find it enables me to come into alignment with his Spirit. And, over time, those deep impressions begin to form into words. A simple yes or no can be so encouraging as we learn to listen.

I heard, *Yes—go. It will be good.*

(More at walkingwithgod.net)

Whole and Holy

And now it's raining.

I'm pretty darn sure God told me to come, and now it's raining.

Don't let this throw you. Things may not unfold the way you think they will when you're following God. Remember—he is after both our transformation *and* our joy. The one hangs upon the other. I needed rest more than I knew. But I am so addicted to busyness, I was about to turn his gift of rest into a week of chores. Fix the fence, paint the door, get 'er done. So he has to pin me down on the porch so that I don't wreck the gift he's trying to give.

And now that I am pinned down, I can see what God is bringing to the surface. I am acutely aware of my drivenness. If I keep up this pace, I will burn out. Have a heart attack. Go down in flames. And now I can walk with God even more intimately as I cooperate with him in my transformation. He's got me here on the porch so that he can bring to the surface just how compelled I am. And so that, together, we can explore why. This rain shows no signs of letting up. Looks like we have hours to discover what God is after.

Pause. You *do* know what he is after in your own life, don't you? Maybe that's why we stay so busy—to avoid knowing, so we can avoid dealing with it.

And you do know that the “quick fix” doesn't ever work. Simply telling myself, “You are too busy, John. You've got to slow down,” is about as effective as telling an addict to quit. (Has it worked for you?)

There are forces driving the way I live, reasons and compulsions written deep in my soul. I know where my pushing and striving come from. They come from unbelief, from some deep

fear that it's all up to me. Life is up to me. I've got to make as much headway as I can before the bottom drops out. Make hay while the sun shines 'cause it isn't always going to shine and what's *that* underlying dread? God is not just after behavior modification (as in, stop it), but real and deep and lasting change.

And that brings me to another assumption that we must hold if we would walk with God—true holiness requires the healing of our souls.

How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. (Ephesians 1:3–4 MSG)

Whole and holy. The two go hand in hand. Oh, how important this is. You can't find the holiness you want without deep wholeness. And you can't find the wholeness you want without deep holiness. You can't simply tell the meth addict to quit. She does *need to* quit, but she requires profound healing *to be able to* quit. You can't just tell a raging man to stop losing his temper. He would love to stop. He'd give anything to stop. He doesn't know how. He doesn't know all the forces within him that swell up and overwhelm him with anger. Telling him to stop raging is like telling him to hold back the sea.

For too long there have been two camps in Christendom. One is the holiness, or “righteousness,” crowd. They are the folks holding up the standard, preaching a message of moral purity. The results have been . . . mixed. Some morality, and a great deal

of guilt and shame. Very little lasting change comes from this approach. Hey, I'm all for purity. It's just that you can't get there without the healing of your soul.

God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. (Hebrews 12:10–13)

Healed. As in fixed. Restored. Made whole. The Bible says we can't hope to walk the path God would have us walk without the healing of our souls. Now, the other major camp is the "grace" camp. Their message is that we can't hope to satisfy a holy God, but we are forgiven. We are under grace. And praise the living God, we are under grace. But what about holiness? What about deep personal change? Paul says, "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14). He's assuming that a certain kind of grace will set us free from sin's power over our daily lives.

My drivenness and compulsion will ruin me if they continue. God knows that. He also knows what I need. Sitting here on the porch, I am asking him to come into the deep places of my soul and heal me. I know, at least in part, what my drivenness is rooted in. Early on in my life, I found myself alone. It was a deep and profound wounding. No boy is meant to be on his own. But that wounding led to a sinful resolution—*I will make it on my own*. I felt that life was up to me (that was my wounding). I

resolved to live as though life were up to me (that was my sin). The path to freedom from all this pushing and striving involves *both* repentance and healing so that I can be made whole and holy by his love. Listen to Jesus:

“For this people’s heart has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts
and turn, and I would heal them.” (Matthew 13:15)

Heal them. Jesus yearned for his people to turn back to him *so that* he could heal them! The “otherwise” means that if they weren’t so hardheaded, they would turn to him and he would heal them. This truth is essential to your view of the gospel. It will shape your convictions about nearly everything else. God wants to restore us. Our part is to “turn,” to repent as best we can. But we also need his healing. As Ephesians 1:4 says, God chose us to make us whole and holy through his love. God will make known to us the path of life if we will follow him. And as we do, we will find along that path our need for wholeness and holiness.

And so I’m praying, and journaling:

Jesus, forgive me. I ask your forgiveness of this deep commitment to make life work on my own—for all my striving and pushing and for all the unbelief that propels me. Forgive me.

And I ask you to heal me of this. Heal the places in my soul that have so long felt alone, felt that life was up to me.

And as I'm praying this, I remember something God has been saying to me for some time. Or rather, he speaks it to me again. It addresses the deep fears in my heart, speaks to the core of this issue.

My favor will never leave you.

And a soft, cool breeze caresses my face.

Making Room for Joy

A few years ago a woman with a sensitive spirit and a keen eye for what God is up to pulled me aside to offer this warning: "The battle in your life is against your joy."

It hit me like a Mack truck.

But of course. Suddenly life made sense. The hassles. The battles. The disappointments. The losses. The resignation. Why hadn't I seen it before? I mean, I face a lot of different skirmishes day to day, but now the plot, the diabolical plot behind them all came into view. I began to see how the enemy was first trying to take away all joy from my life. Wear me down. Then, weary and thirsty, I would be quite vulnerable to some counterfeit joy. It would start with mild addictions, then build to something worse. Thus he would destroy all that God has done in and through me. It was so obvious. Of course.

Her observation became a revelation became a rescue. The smoke alarm sounding off before the house goes up in flames. For several days the whole world made sense in light of joy. But in the day-to-day grind of the ensuing months, all that clarity slipped away. Completely. Joy as a category seemed . . . irrelevant. Nice but unessential. Like owning a hot tub. And distant too. The hot tub is in Fiji. Wouldn't it be nice? Ain't going to happen. Life's not

really about joy. I've got all this *stuff* that has to get done. The mail is stacking up, and I haven't paid the bills in two months. The Service Engine Soon light came on in the Honda. Joy? Life's about surviving—and getting a little pleasure. That's what seemed true.

Really now—how much do you think about joy? Do you see it as essential to your life, something God insists on?

Yesterday morning my sons Sam, Blaine, and I rode our horses together up through the woods. The sunlight was filtering down through the aspens as we followed an old game trail we'd never taken before. Our golden retriever, Scout, was running on ahead of us. The horses seemed to be enjoying the ride as much as we were. It was cool under the canopy of aspens. Quiet. Timeless. In the evening Blaine and I took the canoe over to a high mountain reservoir fed by a beautiful rushing stream. We paddled about a half mile from the put-in back to the inlet. The trout were rising. Not another soul was around. For an hour we caught rainbows on dry flies, surrounded by mountains, the rushing inlet the only sound of the evening. On the way home we saw a fox, and a porcupine.

It was an incredible day. One of those rare and glorious days that become, over time, the icon of summer vacation in our memories.

So, why don't I wake with a joyful heart today? Joy was just here. Where did it go?

I feel like I met a stranger on an airplane, and we clicked. We swapped some stories, had a few drinks, laughed together. Then I drove home to an empty house. It's like that. I had an encounter with joy. It touched a longing. Now I begin to realize I haven't even given ten minutes to joy, let alone pursued it as essential to my life.

It has to do with agreements I've made without even knowing it. By "agreements" I mean those subtle convictions we come to, assent to, give way to, or are raised to assume are true. It happens down deep in our souls where our real beliefs about life are formed. Something or someone whispers to us, *Life is never going to turn out the way you'd hoped*, or *Nobody's going to come through*, or *God has forsaken you*. And something in us responds, *That's true*. We make an agreement with it, and a conviction is formed. It seems so reasonable. I think we come to more of our beliefs in this way than maybe any other. Subtle agreements.

Anyhow, I began to realize that what I've done for most of my life is resign myself to this idea: *I'm really not going to have any lasting joy*. And from that resignation, I've gone on to try and find what I could have. Women do this in marriage. They see that they are not going to have any real intimacy with their husbands, so they lose themselves in soaps or tabloids or romance novels. Men find their work a sort of slow death, so they get a little something in the bar scene each night. Have a few beers with the boys, watch the game. Joy isn't even a consideration. Settle for relief.

Now, to be fair, joy isn't exactly falling from the sky these days. We don't go out to gather it each morning like manna. It's hard to come by. Joy seems more elusive than winning the lottery. We don't like to think about it much, because it hurts to allow ourselves to feel how much we long for joy, and how seldom it drops by.

But joy *is* the point. I know it is. God says that joy is our strength. "The joy of the LORD is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10). I think, *My strength? I don't even think of it as my occasional boost*. But yes, now that I give it some thought, I can see that when I have felt joy I have felt more alive than at any other time in my life. Pull up a memory of one of your best moments. The

day at the beach. Your eighth birthday. Remember how you felt. Now think what life would be like if you felt like that on a regular basis. Maybe that's what being strengthened by joy feels like. It would be good.

I take up a concordance and begin to read a bit on joy.

"My heart leaps for joy" (Psalm 28:7). When was the last time my heart leapt for joy? I don't even remember.

"You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound" (Psalm 4:7). I believe David when he says this. I believe God does this. I just can't say I really know firsthand what he's talking about.

I turn to the Gospels. What does Jesus have to say about joy?

"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:11)

"Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete." (John 16:24)

"I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them." (John 17:13)

Joy complete? The full measure of his joy? That's what Jesus wants for us? I'm almost stunned. I can't believe that it's come down to joy. It's so obvious now, yet it makes me really uncomfortable. Probably because it's too close to my heart, to what I long for. Joy is such a tender thing, I think we resent it. We avoid it, because it feels too vulnerable to allow ourselves to admit the joy we long for but do not have.

Jesus, I have no idea where to go from here. But I invite you in. Take me where I need to go. I know this is connected to the life you want me to live.

What Should I Read?

Let's come back to the place of the Bible in our walk with God.

God speaks to us through the Bible. And what is said there has more authority than anything else in our lives. It is the bedrock of our faith, the test of all things, a living connection to the heart and mind of God—when we approach it with the help of the Spirit of God. I add that qualifier because we do well to remember that the Pharisees read and studied the Bible, “but their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:14–15). How very sad. They read it, but they didn't get it.

The Bible is not a magic book. It doesn't reveal its treasures simply because you read a passage. It doesn't make you holy simply because you hold it in high esteem. Many cults use the Bible. Even Satan quotes Scripture (see Luke 4:9–12). We need the Bible and all it has to say to us. Desperately. We also need the Spirit of God to guide us in our reading and study. “All this I have spoken while still with you,” Jesus said, as he was preparing his followers for life after his departure. “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:25–26).

We need God to help us understand his Word. We can't separate

a walk with God from our reading of Scripture. The two go hand in hand. Like having a tour guide as you wander the halls of the Louvre. “If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you” (John 14:15–17). Too many people approach Scripture without an intimacy with God, and they either end up frustrated because they’ve gotten so little out of it or, far worse, amass an intellectual understanding quite apart from any real communion with God. It usually results in religious pride.

The Bible is meant to be read in fellowship with God. Things can get really weird if we don’t.

Having offered that caveat, let me say that the more we know the Scriptures and, the more they become a part of us, the more we’ll find that we *can* walk with God. Having spent a good deal of time in the Word of God, you’ll give the Holy Spirit a library within you to draw upon. For example, I’ll be sitting in a meeting and getting mad, and the Spirit reminds me, “Man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (James 1:20). I cool down. Or I’ll walk by the tabloids in the bookstore, sirens on every cover, and the Spirit reminds me, “Do not lust in your heart after her beauty” (Proverbs 6:25). Or I’ll see a gorgeous vista in the mountains, and because I know “the earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it” (Psalm 24:1), my heart fills with gratitude and I’ll be reminded of what God is like through his creation.

There is no substitute for the written Word of God. No matter how precious a personal word may be to us, no matter how cool some insight may be, it doesn’t compare to the written Word. I’ve

seen too many immature Christians chase after “revelation” and go wacky because they are not rooted and grounded in the Scripture.

The precepts of the LORD are right,
giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the LORD are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.
The fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever.
The ordinances of the LORD are sure
and altogether righteous.
They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the comb.
By them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
(Psalm 19:8–11)

But *what* to read?

It’s a big book, even with the microprint on tissue paper. There’s a lot to take in. All sorts of different content and styles. It can feel like picking up *War and Peace* or Robertson’s biography of Stonewall Jackson. Now, I’m all for the various programs available to help us read through the Bible in a year or study a certain book. It helps so much to know context and history. Commentaries, concordances, and electronic Bible study software abound—I use them all and benefit from them.

But in addition to all that, let me add how rich it can be simply to ask God, *What would you have me read today?*

Letting your Shepherd lead you in your reading allows him to take you right to a passage that you may not have thought of yourself or that may not have been in line with the recent program you were using, but is the *very* word you need. In this way I have received many warnings, endless counsel, immeasurable comfort, and the incomparable intimacy of God speaking directly to me through his Word.

Just this morning I asked God what to read. At first I simply heard, *John*. So I open my Bible to the gospel of John, and as I turn there I ask, *Where in John?* and God says, *Ten*. (He's said this several times these past few mornings.) Now, I realize that hearing God in such a direct manner might be a new experience for you. It certainly wasn't my experience for years. No shame in that. We're students, and we're all learning. Don't let your experience of God up to this point limit what you might enjoy with him in the coming years.

I began to read in John 10, not really knowing yet what God was up to, but expectant. I knew that even if I didn't discern exactly why I was in this passage this morning, I know I would benefit from being here. So I was good either way. This is what I read:

“I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.” (John 10:1–4)

I love this passage and have spent a good deal of time here. But today I'm struck by the phrase "he goes on ahead of them." It's almost as if I'd never noticed it before, never given it my heart's attention. Jesus goes ahead of us. That is so reassuring, and that is *such* a different view than the one with which I approach each day. Or better, it reveals to me the way that I see each day. Here's what happens.

I connect with God in the morning in prayer and sometimes through reading of some sort. But then a shift occurs. Somewhere between prayer, and having breakfast, and getting the boys off to school, and getting to work myself, and beginning to answer e-mails and tackle projects, a subtle parting occurs. I don't feel as though I am following Jesus going ahead of me. I just sort of take it for granted that I am blazing the trail. Until this morning I never would have put it into those words. But this passage makes me realize that I don't see our relationship as God going on ahead of me. But I want to. Oh, how I want to. My heart is engaged. This is no intellectual exercise, but a living and immediate conversation with God through his Word.

Do you really, Jesus? Do you really go on ahead of me?

That is such a better view of God, a view where he is engaged with us and intimately involved in the world and in our lives. As I think about it now, I think I have been something of an unconscious Deist. God is there, but I'm doing my darnedest down here while he is sort of smiling down on me, not really engaged in the details. That view is not true of him, and it is an awful way to live. I think of George MacDonald's wonderful insight:

If to myself—"God sometimes interferes"—

I said, my faith at once would be struck blind.

I see him all in all . . .
A love he is that watches and that hears
(*Diary of an Old Soul*)

I do believe this. Why don't I believe it in the day-to-day events of my life? Maybe the issue goes more like this: I do believe Christ leads us, but I make no *conscious* effort to follow him in all the "in-between" times, where life is really being lived. The question is, will I follow God, as opposed to just going on my way into each day? That is the transition to a better life. To be asking him where he is headed and what he is doing throughout the day. So that while he *is* going on ahead of me, I am following.

This was just what I needed to read this morning, just what the doctor ordered.

Now, there are other times when I'll read what I think God has prompted me to read, and at the time it doesn't make any sense at all. Several weeks ago it was *John 7*. I read the whole chapter, and while I appreciated the story, it was flat. Like reading the periodic table of elements. I sort of shrugged my shoulders and went into the day, knowing that whatever God meant by the passage, if I even heard him right, he would bring it around. A few days went by, and I was driving down the road one day thinking about how tied up in knots I get when I'm self-conscious about what others think of me.

Then it was as if the Spirit brought me back to *John 7*.

Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about him. Some said, "He is a good man."

Others replied, "No, he deceives the people." But no one would say anything publicly about him for fear of the Jews.

Not until halfway through the Feast did Jesus go up to the temple courts and begin to teach. The Jews were amazed and asked, “How did this man get such learning without having studied?”

Jesus answered, “My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me. If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him.” (vv. 12–18)

There is such a freedom in Jesus. He didn’t care what the religious scholars thought about him, good or bad. He didn’t let the current of public opinion sway him either way. He just said what he had to say, knowing he was approved by his Father.

Oh, this is what you were pointing to. This is what you wanted me to see.

Yes.

Lord, I want the freedom you have. To be completely free of what others think of me.

Give it a try. Ask God what he would have you read. Settle yourself, quiet your heart. Let go of the pressure that says you *have* to hear from him right now or things aren’t right between you. Things are fine. You are his. Rest your heart and your relationship there. Then ask this simple question: *God, what would you have me read today?* Pause and listen. Repeat the question. If you begin to get an impression, or believe you heard him say something, repeat it. *Was that John 10, Lord? You want me to read John 10?* (That “trying it on” thing.) Practice this over the course of several weeks.

You will be delighted with what unfolds.

When We Don't Hear God

I cannot find my watch this morning. And it's driving me nuts.

Here I am, with a few precious hours to write, but I keep getting up every fifteen minutes or so to look for my watch. And I can't find it. I don't really need it right now. I don't have to be anywhere for another hour and a half. But I think it's the idea that I *can't* find it that's got me obsessed *with* finding it. I just took another lap around the house, looking in all the usual places—the nightstand, the bathroom counter, behind the cushions on the sofa—and it isn't there. (It wasn't there when I rooted around fifteen minutes ago either. Do I think it's going to magically appear?) Then it occurs to me, *You are writing a book on walking with God. Why don't you ask him where it is?*

Okay. So I pray, "God, you know where my watch is. Where is it?"

Silence. I don't hear anything.

I don't know why. But I'm not going to let that be the verdict on my relationship with God today. This is really important, friends. We don't know on any given day all that's playing into why we can't seem to hear from God. It could be that I'm still too distracted, obsessed with finding my watch myself. It could be that the enemy is blocking me. It could be that God isn't going to speak on this right now. It could be that he wants me to discover something else—like why I am so obsessed with finding my watch when I don't need it and I really should be writing. I don't know all that's going on.

But I do know this: it can't be the verdict of how I'm doing with God or how he feels about me in this moment.

Hearing from God *flows out of* our relationship. That relationship was established for us by Jesus Christ. "Therefore, since

we have been justified [made right with God] through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (Romans 5:1). Whatever we might be feeling, we do have relationship with God now, because we belong to him. And our relationship is secure. “I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39).

I am God’s. He is mine.

Because we *do* have relationship with God secured for us by Jesus Christ and all he has done, we can now grow in *developing* that relationship. We can, on the basis of what is objectively true, move into an experience of God in our lives that deepens over time. And that includes learning to hear his voice. Prayer not as making speeches to God, a one-sided conversation, but as the act of talking to and hearing from God. A two-sided conversation. It is a rich inheritance we have.

My ability to hear God’s voice on any given day does not change my position in Christ one bit. I share this because the last thing I want to introduce into your faith is shame or doubt or some other attack because you’re not hearing clearly right now. Taking the journey toward an intimacy with God that includes conversational intimacy is a beautiful thing, full of surprises and gifts from him.

But it can also send us reeling if we are basing our relationship with God on our ability to hear from him in this moment or on this particular issue. I know that’s happened to me. Our faith is based on something much more solid than today’s episode. We have the Scriptures, given to us by God, and they are the bedrock

for everything else. They tell us that because we have placed our faith in God, we belong to him and are completely secure. They tell us that he is involved in our lives today, whether we feel it or not. They tell us he will never, ever abandon us.

So, if you're not yet hearing, don't worry. It's okay. Keep praying. Keep listening. Notice what God might be up to other than answering the immediate question. Like right now, what I notice is that I want to start blaming people. *Who stole my watch? I'll bet it was Stasi.* Geez, Louise, what is *that*? Why am I so quick to find someone to blame? I'm laughing at myself. *Easy there, buddy. You don't know that. Don't go jumping to a federal indictment here.* What I need to do right now is just let it go. Let it go.

This story has a playful ending.

An hour and a half has gone by, now it's time for me to leave, and I really would love to have my watch. So I pray again, *Jesus, help me find my watch.* I'm not pushing into hearing right now; I'm trusting something deeper—that he's here and that he can guide me in other ways. This isn't an all-or-nothing proposition. It's not either I hear from God or he isn't involved. Not at all. I go into the bedroom, grab a pair of socks out of the drawer, and sit down in the middle of the floor to put them on. I don't think I've ever done this before, sat down in this particular spot to put on my socks. But from this angle I can see under the bed. And there it is. My watch.

I sense God smiling.

You Shall Know Them by Their Fruit

I'm trying to write this morning, but I can't seem to concentrate. I just can't seem to find the groove.

Over the past twenty minutes, I've tried several approaches to dealing with this. I've laid out an outline to help me think clearly. I've gone to a different section of the book to see if I might be more inspired there. I've given in to distraction—checking my e-mail, wandering around the house, hoping that when I return I'll be my old self again. Nothing seems to be working. And now it dawns on me—who would have a vested interest in thwarting the progress of this book? Who would be delighted to distract me for a month, let alone a day? Who would want to distort my thinking just enough to diminish the beauty or the helpfulness of what I'm trying to say?

You shall know them, Jesus said, by their fruit.

The principle holds true for anything in life. It is especially helpful in diagnosing what the enemy might be up to. What is the fruit of what you're experiencing? What is its *effect*? If it continues, what will the results of that be? What will be lost? Jesus said he came that we might have life and have it abundantly. He also warned that the thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy. Is something being stolen? That's not from God. He called Satan the accuser of the brethren. Are you under accusation, that feeling of "I'm such an idiot"? (I'm using polite language here.) Look at the fruit—it will give you a good idea of the tree it came from.

Paul says that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22). I'm not feeling real joyful at the moment. In fact, the longer whatever this oppression is hangs around, the more discouraged I get. There's not a lot of peace here either. Not like a river. Not even a rivulet. Whatever this cloud is I'm under, it isn't bringing with it the fruit of the Spirit. I can't get back to the clear air I normally have when I'm writing. Something is in the way.

It's vague, I can't quite name it yet, but I sure can see the fruit of it. I can't write.

Now, certainly, we need to beware the fruit of the flesh. Paul names those as “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (Galatians 5:19). Nope. None of that seems to be going on here. I'm certainly open to conviction of sin, but I'm not raging, and I'm not drunk. And it's not like writer's block is in the list. Something else is in the way.

The first major awakening in our journey of faith is coming to realize that God exists. It can be quite a jolt. The second, and far more life-changing, epiphany is when we come to realize that we have to deal with him. Take him into account. We come to see that God is not to be ignored. This is an even bigger jolt and a major course correction for any human being. Many people avoid it for years. But hopefully, we come to see that there is no better way than to place our love and trust in God, accept his invitation to life, and give our hearts to him. We become his sons and daughters through faith in Jesus Christ. And hopefully his followers.

But there is another major awakening. The next epiphany in our journey of faith is coming to realize that Satan exists. And that we have to deal with him too. We come to realize that he is not to be ignored either. I'm sorry to say that this awakening is uncommon, even among the followers of Christ—despite the fact that Scripture is filled with warnings of an enemy.

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back.

But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. . . . Then the dragon was enraged . . . and went off to make war against . . . those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus. (Revelation 12:7–9, 17)

Satan has been hurled to the earth. Along with all his forces of fallen angels. (They’re called demons.) They are making war now against those who have become the friends of God. Except most of the friends of God don’t know it. I didn’t know it for years. I was ignorant. In the dark. But this is a very helpful thing to know. It will shed a great deal of light on the events of your life.

Let’s come back to the naive assumption that $A + B = C$. Be good. Believe in God. And all will be well. *No*, Jesus said. *There is more going on here. You have an enemy. You have to take that into account, or you won’t find the life I am offering you.* Judging by the fruit of my discouragement and lack of clarity, and the fact that God seems far away this morning, I’ve got a pretty good hunch that the enemy is here, jamming my writing process.

So I have to stop and pray.

Do It Now

I have to pray about this *now*.

But whenever I’m facing spiritual attack of any kind, the pull is nearly always to try and ignore it, push it off till later, or explain it away as bad digestion or my ongoing inadequacies or something

else. Anything else. I see this in all my friends as well. We just don't want to deal with it.

God gave us a will. Learning to exercise it is a great part of maturing as a person. You don't want to get out of bed in the morning? You'll lose your job. You don't want to deny yourself anything? You'll go into debt. This is Growing Up 101. And there is nothing like spiritual warfare to teach you to exercise your will. For one thing, you won't want to deal with it. So the best thing you can do is turn, face the attack, and deal with it. Now. It strengthens your will. But most Christians end up not really praying directly against the attack. They'll pray something like *Jesus, I ask you to take this away*. If it's discouragement they're dealing with, they may pray, *I ask you to encourage me*. And it's a good thing to be encouraged. Or let's say it's lust they've been confronted with. Most folks will then pray, *Give me pure thoughts, Lord*. And it's a good thing to ask for pure thoughts.

But they are still dodging the issue.

The enemy is present in the form of some foul spirit, and *you* must command him to leave. As the Scripture urges, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). No resist, no flee. We are *commanded* to resist. Paul shows us how it's done. "Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, 'In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!' At that moment the spirit left her" (Acts 16:18). Out loud. In the name of Jesus Christ. That's how it's done.

Now, it really helps if you can name the spirit. You are dealing with a distorted being here, a foul spirit filled with disobedience and deception. It may duck and maneuver and refuse to leave. You've got to be direct, and you have to be authoritative. "'Be quiet!' Jesus said sternly" (Luke 4:35). Note the word *sternly*.

Sometimes you know what you are dealing with by its fruit. You're suddenly slammed with lust—then it's Lust you must banish. You're under a malaise of despair—then it's Despair you must banish. But even better at this point is to *stop and ask God* what you're dealing with. Don't just swing wildly away at it. Ask Jesus what you need to pray against. As you grow in your ability to hear God's voice, this will become very helpful in dealing with the enemy. Quite often now, after years of practice, I'll just start praying, and as I'm praying I listen to the Lord and pray what he tells me to pray. Here is how I prayed this morning:

"I bring the kingdom of God, the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the fullness of the work of Christ against this spirit of distraction and against all foul spirits here." Distraction doesn't quite seem to hit the mark, so I ask God, *What is it, Lord—what am I dealing with here?*

Diminishment, he says. Oh yes, that's been an enemy of mine for many years. A spirit of Diminishment. Okay. "I bring the full work of the Lord Jesus Christ against Diminishment, and I bind Diminishment from me." Remember, Jesus says to "tie up the strong man" (Matthew 12:29). Clearly the context of his instruction is dealing with foul spirits, because in the preceding verse he has just said, "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (v. 28). Then he says to bind the enemy.

Next I pause for a moment and ask Christ, *Is there anything else I need to pray?*

Cleanse yourself with my blood and ask my Spirit to restore you in me, restore our union, and inspire you.

"I cleanse myself with the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. I bring the blood of Jesus over my spirit, soul, and body, over my

heart, mind, and will. I ask your Spirit, Jesus, to restore me in you, renew me in you, to renew our union, and to inspire me. In the name of Jesus.”

There, I’m already feeling better. Not completely better—sometimes these things take a bit of time to be worked out in the spiritual realm. But I’m better now, and I’m going to keep an eye out for any further assault. If I’m not completely better in thirty minutes or so—meaning clear and no longer “under it”—then I’ll stop and pray like this again.

Now, I know this can sound kind of weird or spooky. But the Scriptures make it very plain that the followers of Christ will experience spiritual attack. “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Peter 5:8–9). “Your brothers” means fellow Christians. And “throughout the world” means that these spiritual attacks aren’t just limited to a Billy Graham crusade or a mission to New Guinea. They are part of the Christian life.

I suppose I pray against some form of assault every other day or so. When things are bad, every day. You might think that’s a lot, but you’ll soon discover that if you want life and joy, if you are moving into deeper intimacy with God, you are going to attract attention. The enemy will not like it. That’s okay. Don’t surrender. Don’t back down. As Scripture says, resist. Rise up. Fight back. If you do, you can be rid of the attack. And best of all, it makes you holy. Because it strengthens your will and draws you closer to Christ. It causes you to mature, for you have to be intentional and deal with assaults directly.

No more dodging.

(More at walkingwithgod.net)

Beware of Agreements

How much of this oppressive stuff do we live under and how much joy do we surrender because we never stop to ask, “Where is this crud coming from?” I could have assumed that I was just having an off morning. I could have chalked up the distractions to writer’s block. It would have been so easy to do so, so very easy to make a subtle agreement, something along the lines of, *I guess I’m just not going to get anything done today*. You have to be really careful about these agreements.

We know the enemy is a liar. In fact, he’s the father of all lies (John 8:44). We also know he is cunning. More cunning than any creature God created (Genesis 3:1). So, we might expect him to be rather good at getting us to believe his lies. Very, very good. His attacks are often quite subtle, masquerading as something else (like writer’s block). What he’s hoping is that we won’t see an attack for what it is, and that we’ll go ahead and make an agreement with it. Let me show you how this works.

We were catching up with some old friends over dinner one night, a couple we hadn’t seen in years. During the course of the evening, we talked about our kids and what they were up to and about trips we’d been on. A wonderful free-roaming conversation. Suddenly the woman (I’ll call her Anne) stopped me midstory. “You guys keep saying things like ‘Then God told us to’ or ‘We asked God, and he said. . . .’ You act like God speaks to you all the time.”

“Well, no, not all the time,” I said. “But often, yes.”

She had a troubled look on her face. “I’ve never heard the voice of God.” Now, mind you, this dear woman loves God and has been a Christian for thirty years, a pastor’s wife for much of that time.

“What if that’s not you, Anne?” I said. “I mean, what if that’s not because of you?” Tears began to well up in her eyes. She thought it was her fault. We all do that. We think it’s us. “Who would have a vested interest in you not hearing the voice of God?”

“Satan, I guess,” she said halfheartedly. She wasn’t a big believer in spiritual warfare. “Let’s do this—let’s pray and see if there is anything in the way, anything that might be blocking you from hearing God’s voice.” The four of us got up from the table, went into the living room, sat down, and began to pray, asking, “Jesus, is anything in the way of Anne hearing from you?” We sit for several minutes in silence. I can tell that we’re butting up against something, partly because I’m suddenly hit with an overwhelming sense of *This isn’t going to work. You shouldn’t be doing this.*

Then Stasi said, “Well, I hear the word *abandonment*.”

Okay. Abandonment. You never know where these things are going to take you. I turned back to Anne and asked, “Have you ever felt abandoned, Anne?” More tears. She can’t speak but just nods. “Tell us.”

She began to recount a story from early on in her Christian life. Her first baby had terrible colic and screamed all day. He was a royal screamer. She reached her breaking point one day and cried out in desperation for God to make him stop. But he didn’t. The enemy was there in a moment. *You see, God has abandoned you*, he said. And something in her heart agreed. She made an agreement. *God has abandoned me*. And a curtain fell in Anne’s heart between her and God.

Paul warns us that unresolved emotional issues can create spiritual strongholds in a Christian's life. "'In your anger do not sin.' Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:26–27). Paul was writing a letter to believers, and he is pretty clear here that the ways we mishandle the events of our lives can give the enemy a foothold or stronghold in our lives. Again, there's nothing weird or spooky here, just part of the battle and something we have to deal with. The fruit is that Anne can't hear from God. That's certainly not the fruit of the Spirit.

"Jesus, how do we pray about this?" I asked. *Have her break the agreement.* So we led Anne in a prayer like this: "Jesus, you promised never to leave me nor forsake me. Forgive me for making the agreement that you abandoned me. I renounce that agreement now. In your name." Having done that, we could then bring the work of Jesus Christ against the spirit of abandonment and against every lying spirit that had brought this to Anne.

Now what? I asked in my heart. *Invite my healing.* So I led Anne in a prayer something like this: "Jesus, I felt so abandoned by you. Come and heal my heart in this place. Come into this memory, this time in my life. Come and minister to me here." We let there be a few moments of silence, let Christ minister to her.

Now what? I asked Christ in my heart. *Ask her if she hears my voice.*

If you've ever driven at night in winter conditions, you know that feeling when you need to hit your brakes and you're hoping you aren't at that moment on a sheet of black ice. That hold-your-breath moment when everything in you says, *I hope this works.* That's how I felt. *Lord, the things you ask me to do.* Whenever we are praying with someone like this, I am very careful not to bring

further distress or give the enemy an opportunity by inviting the person to a place he or she might not be ready or able to go. But God said to do it, and so I said, “Anne, Jesus wants you to listen for him now. Would you like to do that?”

She nodded, and we prayed, “Lord Jesus, what do you want to say to your beloved? What is your word to Anne tonight?”

I’m thinking, *You’d better come through*. A long silence. I sneaked a peek at Anne, and she was crying. “What do you hear?”

“He said he loves me.”

That was the first time in thirty years she’d heard God speak to her. All because of an agreement.

Being Willing to Have a Look

So, I drive this old ’78 Toyota Land Cruiser, and for the most part, I love it. It’s a simple, straightforward, no-nonsense truck. No onboard computers, no electric windows, no navigation system. (The last thing I need is a woman’s voice telling me where to turn: “Merge right. Exit right in one-quarter mile. Exit now.”) I love the simplicity of old cars. Anyhow, I went to move it yesterday evening, but the battery was dead. There’s a quirk in the brake lights that makes them stay on sometimes after I’ve turned off the car, and if I don’t pay attention, it drains the battery overnight. Quirkiness comes with old cars. And people.

I solved the problem for the moment by jumping the truck with our other car, but I knew I hadn’t driven it far enough or long enough to charge the battery off the alternator, knew I’d have to deal with it this morning before I headed into work. When we jumped it last night, I noticed my battery terminals looked cor-

roded. I thought, *Maybe all I'll need to do is clean them off.* Hope springs eternal.

As I unlatched the hood and propped it open, I was struck by the fact that it's been a long time since I've looked under the hood. I had that nagging feeling, *It's been a long time since you looked at anything under here.* It's not a good feeling, that feeling of neglect and what might need to be faced here. I have the same awkward moment every time I see the floss in the bathroom drawer. Anyhow, back to the Land Cruiser.

The first thing you meet when you look under the hood of most cars is the radiator—the black boxy-looking thing with the little silver cap on top. Water and antifreeze go in there. It's how your car cools itself. I thought, *Uh-oh—when was the last time I checked the water level?* I couldn't even remember. Last summer? Popping the cap off, I see no fluid. *Yikes. Better fill that.* I look around the garage and find an old jug of Prestone and begin to pour it in. The reservoir of the radiator is a labyrinth of tubes, and you never know how much fluid you need in these old cars until you start pouring it in. The more it takes, the longer it has been since you took care of it. Quite a bit goes in before the green stuff finally appears near the top.

As I screw the cap back on, my thoughts turn to the oil. A deeper angst creeps over me. *When was the last time I checked the oil?* I couldn't remember that either. A sort of discomfort-becoming-dread fills my stomach like ice water. It's one thing to forget to keep your radiator filled. If things go wrong, you'll typically find out right away, because your car overheats and steam comes blowing out. But by the time you realize you blew it with your oil, deeper damage has usually been done to your engine. Like a faithful old camel, this Land Cruiser will run till it drops. But

you don't want to do that to a car. You don't want to find out you forgot to add oil by having your engine seize.

Now, I'm standing there knowing all this, knowing that I need to check the oil *now*, but something in me hesitated.

I didn't want to know.

I didn't want to go there.

I knew it had been a long time. And I wasn't sure I really wanted the information lying at the end of my dipstick.

Standing there looking down into the front end of my car like an idiot, immobile, I was struck by the fact that I didn't really want to have a look, and I recognized the feeling. I have it around my checkbook. (*When was the last time I balanced it?*) I have it when I drive past the dentist. (*When was my last checkup?*) I have this sinking feeling around anything I know I've neglected, especially if the neglect has carried on for some time.

We do this with our internal life most of all. Something will come up to cause us to realize it has been a long time (have we ever, really?) since we had a look under the hood. An argument with our spouse. A sudden and very strong pull to someone else's spouse. Fear over a coming presentation. Anxiety. Depression. Someone simply asking, "How are you doing?" We sense rumblings beneath the surface, and we don't want to go there.

I had to have a look. This couldn't go on. So I search around to find the dipstick, pull it out with dread, and sigh with relief to see that, though my oil is low, it is not dangerously low. I sigh when I discover I haven't been driving without oil for who knows how long, and the pool of ice water drains out of my stomach. I find a quart of 5W30 on the shelf behind the snow boots and paint cans and pour it in. Then I set about dealing with the battery.

But I had been confronted with this part of me that is part

coward, part hedonist, part magical thinker. This part of me that just doesn't want to be disturbed, not even when the information will save me later on. I see the same thing in all of my friends. I mean, this is universal. We don't want to have a look under the hood. We don't want to know what we desperately need to know. This is not a good quality. It is *not* our friend.

Over the years I've learned a simple lesson: pay now or pay more later. It's true in every area of life. I don't want to exercise, don't want to pay the price. I just want to coast along. But I end up paying for it later when we're out on a hike or swimming in a lake or I'm dashing from Terminal A to Terminal B to try and catch a flight and I'm sucking air and my side is cramping. I know I'll pay even more down the road in terms of my health. I don't want to "pay" in any sense of delayed gratification, don't want to forgo the purchase of something I desire. So I pay nearly twice the amount for the dinner or the iPod or whatever it is by putting it on my credit card and making interest payments over time.

I do it in relationship. I don't want to ask Stasi how things are going, don't want the discomfort of what she might have to say. I don't want to give up the book I'm reading. I mean, this could take hours. So I put off asking until it becomes a major issue. I don't want to step into muddy waters with a friend, tell him what I see—that he is hard to be around—or ask him what's troubling him. So I pay more later when we've grown really distant or I even lose the friendship altogether because the distance is just too far to cross.

Good grief, I would rather risk whatever dental decay is going on in my mouth than take the time to floss, because (this is said in a whiny, self-pitying sort of way), "I'm tired." I feel no shame using this example, because I know most of you avoid flossing too.

Here's what it comes down to: we don't want to be inconvenienced.

Whether it's the oil level in my truck or an old wound that's lingering under the surface in my heart, I don't want the information that I already sense could be bad, don't want the disruption it could bring. I'd rather avoid it altogether. Until my car shuts down a hundred miles from home or I find myself deep into an addiction I know is rooted in unhealed pain.

Lord Jesus, I want to shift my posture in this. I want to stop avoiding disruption. I want to be willing to have a look under the hood whenever and wherever you are prompting me. I want to cultivate a willingness to go wherever it is I need to go to face my life. Especially when it comes to the internal issues. I love my old Land Cruiser, but it's a pretty small thing when compared to my heart and my walk with you. I give my yes to you now.

Dear friends, this may be one of the essential differences between those who experience God and the life he offers, and those who don't.

Be willing to have a look.

Now Is the Time

God gives us dozens of these encounters every day, these opportunities to be honest about what motivates us. What we do with them is up to us.

This is how he honors us. When God created each of us, he gave us a will, and that beautiful and mysterious inner life we call the soul. Just as you would want to give your growing son or daughter room to make his or her own decisions, God steps

back a bit to let us make ours. These simple moments of decision are filled with significance. When I choose to avoid whatever it is God has brought up, something in me weakens. Something feels compromised. It is at least a refusal to mature. But it also feels like a refusal to step toward God. Thankfully, the opposite is true. When I choose to face the uncertain, admit the neglect, or enter into my fears, something in me grows up a little bit. I feel strengthened. The scales tip toward a closer walk with God.

Whatever else we do with these moments, let us be honest about one thing—there is no getting to it later. We don't get to it later. It simply goes away. And I wonder—how often do we say to ourselves, *I'll get to it later*, knowing that it will never happen, and thus we appease our conscience in the moment *and* avoid the issue, let it slip away under the ruse of “later.”

So, how do we walk with God in the day to day, in the moment?

We go with it. Now. As it is unfolding. That is the only way to have any real relationship with Jesus Christ. I had to seize the moment on the porch in the rain and go with what God was bringing to the surface. It would have been easy to ignore it. But I would have missed what God was doing. I had to face the warfare when it struck, deal with the enemy, pray then and there. Otherwise, I would have lived under that malaise for who knows how long. I saw a window of opportunity with Anne at dinner, a chance to offer her the life and joy of Christ. Part of me wanted to ignore that opportunity, offer some banal word of encouragement, and get back to my pasta. But we would have missed a beautiful breakthrough.

Now is the time, dear friends.

Rest

There's a cool breeze blowing this afternoon, and the skies are cloudy. The breeze is coming from the west, and it soothes across my face as I sit here on the picnic table looking west to the Flat Tops. It smells different up at the ranch now—the lupine is gone and the sage isn't as pungent as it is in July when it's hot. The seasons are about to change. I can sense it in the earth. Things are quieter in a “summer's finished” sort of way.

I love this in-between time. My camp director days of summer are over. No one is asking me anything. The opening of archery season is not until next weekend. There is nothing to be done. The things I've done today I've done only because I wanted to. Chopped some wood. Fed the horses.

It's so quiet. And I absolutely love it. No e-mail. No phone to answer. My cell phone doesn't get reception here. Everyone I know is at least four hours away. Maybe I'll make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for dinner because I don't want to make dinner.

And the best part of the peace and quiet is God. Just to sit here and be with God. No agenda. Nothing to be fought for or prayed over. Just God. It's like nothing else. Nothing even comes close. This is what the moment offers now. This is what God is up to today. And thankfully, I am going with it now, by resting with him.

Maybe tomorrow I'll fish. If that's what he has in store.

What God Is Giving

Earlier this summer my son Luke and I discovered a great little stream. It runs hard and fast down out of the Flat Tops, broken

by old beaver dams and an occasional deep pool. Now and then it flattens out into lovely runs. We had a wonderful time catching wild rainbows and brook trout, much larger than I expected to see in that little stream. But we only had time to fish about a mile of it. I've been wanting to get back ever since and explore more of what this little treasure has to offer. I noticed on a map that the creek meanders far from the road before it spills into the Bear River, and there's nothing that catches a fisherman's imagination like the possibility of untouched waters. I might be the first guy to fish that section in years.

But I've done some releasing this summer. Things are beginning to ease up down inside. So I pray, *Jesus, is this a good day for fishing, or should I just lay low, hang out here?* I pause and listen. I'm really okay with either answer. *What do you think, Lord?* I listen, open to anything else he might want to say. For I've also learned this: sometimes God wants to speak to me about something entirely different than the question I'm asking. If I don't get an answer on the subject I've raised, I may need to ask a different question. You'll find this very helpful in learning to walk with God. If he doesn't seem to be answering the question you're asking, stop, and ask him what he *does* want to speak to.

Today, I am willing to surrender. Even fishing, which for a recovering fishing addict is a pretty good sign that God is at work. I sit quietly and repeat the question. *Jesus, shall we fish? What do you have for today?*

I hear, *Fish.*

My plan was to hike up the Bear to the confluence and begin my explorations from there. But the canyon of the Bear caught me by surprise. It's beautiful down in there. The river flows through a forest of evergreens, some of them leaning way out over

the water so that the sunlight comes through here and there, splashing the river with light and shade. The river separates now and then into braids and then rejoins itself.

Now, it wasn't my plan to fish the Bear—I was after the untouched waters of the creek. But when I reached the bottom of the canyon and started upriver, I was immediately met with a handsome run of clear green water just begging for a dry fly. It was too inviting. I caught a lovely thirteen-inch rainbow on my first cast and made a change of plans. I would fish the Bear as I hiked—not too seriously, because the creek was my destination—but enough to sample the most alluring runs.

The Bear proved to be the treat of the day. By the time I reached the creek, I'd caught a half-dozen fish without much effort. And now that I'd reached my goal, it became obvious that the creek was unfishable. It plunges off a geologic shelf for a mile or so, cascading down with far too much speed to make for good fishing. I was disappointed. The creek was the point; the river had only been tossed in as a bonus. Or so I thought.

Then I remembered something that God has been teaching me this summer—it's not what he isn't giving but what he *is* giving. We can get so locked onto what we don't have, what we think we want or need, that we miss the gifts God is giving. Really, though the river had proved to be everything I hoped the creek would be—solitude, beauty, wild fish on a dry fly—I sulked halfway back to the car because I didn't get my creek.

Back in June I was obsessed with finding elk antlers on our property. I know there are some magnificent bulls that migrate through in the spring—when the elk shed their antlers—and being on private property, I knew my chances were pretty good of finding a trophy antler lying in the dense timber or along a fence line.

I set out one afternoon to hunt sheds with the prayer, *Father, I know you love me. Would you help me find a shed?* As I wandered up the bluff behind the cabin, I tried to listen to God for any guidance he might give. And it did feel as though at several junctures of game trails I was prompted to go right more than left or push higher up through the timber.

I was optimistic. As I crested the ridge, I had to push through a stand of young firs, and there ahead of me was a huge red-tailed hawk sitting on the top of a small fir, its back to me, swaying in the wind. He didn't know I was there, so I got to watch him for fifteen minutes or so. Every once in a while a gust of wind would sweep up the bluff and the hawk would spread his wings to maintain balance. Or was it to show me his beautiful brown and white pinions? Then suddenly he was in the air and off across the valley. A lovely gift. I knew it was a gift. And I had to say to myself, *It's not what God is not giving, but what he is giving.* No shed. But a hawk. He knows I love hawks. I collect their feathers. Will stop whatever I'm doing to watch them. This was today's gift. God did lead me, just not to what I expected.

Later, in July, my family and I were canoeing the Snake River in Teton National Park. This trip was an intentional move toward joy. We absolutely love that place. It was evening, and I was guiding our family and some dear friends down a part of the river most folks don't get to see and rarely canoe at dusk. I knew we would be alone, at the prime time for wildlife to come down for a drink. Hopes were high of seeing bull moose, elk, and who knows what else. We had seen bear in here before too. The evening could not have been more beautiful. As we glided along the banks, peering into the wild growth on either side, time slipped away. It could have been the 1800s. It could have been the 1600s.

We were utterly alone on the silent river, at twilight, and I knew we were in for a treat.

We passed the den of some river otters we'd seen last year. Nobody home. We passed the island that moose are always hanging out on. Nope. Just a beaver or two. Frustrated, I made the group paddle an extra mile through a back channel where I *knew* the moose had to be. But no. The sun passed behind Mount Moran, and everyone was enjoying a spectacular sunset in the clouds above. But I missed it entirely, because I was so disappointed we didn't see wildlife. I was totally focused on what God was *not* giving, and missed what he *was* giving. Only later, looking at the photos Blaine took, did I see all that I missed. The sunset was truly stunning. Peaches and violets and reds above the black silhouette of the mountains, all reflected in the river. I missed it. I nearly missed the Bear River today.

Father, forgive me. Forgive my demanding posture that life has to come to me on my terms. Oh Lord, how many gifts have I missed? Forgive me. The posture is ugly and narrow. I pray for a more gracious posture, to be open and grateful for what you are giving at any time. I pray to be your son.

On Elk and Elijah

The only thing worse than being cold is being cold and wet.

Opening day of archery season for elk comes at the end of August here in Colorado. It's a day we look forward to all year. Come June and July we start preparing, getting all our gear together, packing and repacking, talking through our plans for opening morning. Dozens of times over. (Often the greatest joy

of an adventure is in the anticipation.) We came up to the ranch a few days ahead of opening weekend to scout for elk, and because like schoolboys about to be released for the holidays we weren't good for much of anything else, so we figured we may as well head out. Our hopes were soaring this year—we found the elk in good numbers, we knew where they were, and we knew how to get there. This was going to be great.

I awoke on opening morning to the sound of rain on the roof of the cabin. Lots of rain. It started about 4:00 a.m. and hadn't let up. To see the four of us sitting around as dawn began to break, you'd have thought it was raining in the house. We looked as woebegone as dogs locked in the kennel while the family drives away. I was thinking, *Thief. The thief of joy.* We were supposed to be out on the mountain by now, in position on opening morning, the best opportunity of the season. And so we started praying for the weather to clear.

Pause. One of my favorite Old Testament stories is the one about Elijah praying for rain. (Yes, I realize we had rain at the moment. Plenty of rain. What we needed was no rain. But hang with me. It works.)

Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.

“Go and look toward the sea,” he told his servant. And he went up and looked.

“There is nothing there,” he said.

Seven times Elijah said, “Go back.”

The seventh time the servant reported, “A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea.”

So Elijah said, “Go and tell Ahab, ‘Hitch up your chariot

and go down before the rain stops you.’” Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on.
(1 Kings 18:42–45)

I love it that Elijah kept sending his servant to have a look. Is it working? I love it that it took this mighty man seven rounds of prayer to get it going. This story is so true to life. And now for the really wild thought: James says we can do it too. Toward the end of his epistle, James is trying to encourage us to pray like we mean it. After the famous passage, “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective,” James points to this story as the example: “Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops” (5:16–18).

Now – why did James make a point of saying that Elijah “was a man just like us”?

Because of that thing in each of us that says, *I could never do that*. Because of that theology that says, “Those stories are exceptions.” That sort of thinking cripples faith. It cuts your prayer life off at the knees. Why are we given stories about the power of godly people praying if our prayers really don’t accomplish anything? James said that Elijah was just like you and me. This was no exception. Meaning, you can pray and do this too. You can pray and see things happen.

Now remember—how many times did Elijah have to take a whack at it? Did he see results on the first round? The second? The third?

Too many times our prayers are wimpy little prayers like, “Jesus, be with us.” He is with you. Always. Or we pray, “Lord, give us

good weather today.” And that’s it. One round and we quit. And then we are discouraged when our prayers don’t seem to do anything, and we come to the conclusion that prayer really doesn’t work. It would be more accurate to say prayers like *that* don’t work. Start praying like Elijah, and maybe you’ll see some results.

(More at www.walkingwithgod.net)

So I am up, and pacing around the very small room we’re in, and I am praying for the weather to clear. I keep looking out the window, like Elijah’s servant, not for a cloud but for a break in the sky. There isn’t any, so we keep praying. Now, I don’t know where the weather is coming from. I don’t know that God doesn’t have something in it for us. I don’t know if my prayers will help the day. All I know is that something that means a lot to us is being stolen.

Joy being stolen—that should always set off our alarm. I also knew that God loves it when we step out in faith. I knew he could sort out my prayers and use them any way he wanted. I also knew I wasn’t just going to sit there and do nothing. So I prayed—hard.

I’d love to say that Blaine looked to the sea and saw a break in the clouds the size of a man’s hand, but it didn’t happen that way. I do know, however, that in about twenty minutes the rain began to ease up just a bit, and we decided to head out. In spite of the weather, we grabbed our gear, broke up into pairs, and began to implement the plans we’d made.

But this is not a story about our faith. Actually, it’s about our remarkable capacity for unbelief.

We are now huddled under the boughs of a spruce tree, high

on the mountain, trying to get out of the rain. We have lost all hope of elk. There are no elk. Not on this mountain. There never have been. Why are we carrying bows? All there is is cold. And wet. The ground is cold and wet. The tall grasses are cold and wet. We are cold and wet. All the world is cold and wet. Yes, we had seen elk. We jumped *three* different herds on our way to this very point. An hour ago there were elk before us and behind us. But now, there are no elk. Never have been. Never will be. All that exists is cold and wet.

And then, the sun comes out. I kid you not.

We rejoice. We come out from under the boughs of the tree, and decide to hike back down into the gulch below us, believing that if there are any elk in the region, that's where they are going to come out. The sun is now beating down on us, and we heat up during our hike and start peeling off layers. By the time we reach the bottom of the mountain, we are hot. All the misery of the morning is gone. The world is filled with sunlight. We were cold? What is cold? I can't remember. There is no rain. Never has been. Now there is only hot. And I'm thirsty.

I am also stunned at my total loss of object permanence—the understanding that just because you can't see a thing right now doesn't mean it no longer exists. You can't see the stars during the day. They vanish from sight. But they haven't gone anywhere. They are still there. The elk are still somewhere on this mountain. Why do I so easily lose heart? I know I do this with God. When his sun is shining on me, so to speak, I am there. I *believe*. But when a cloud comes over—fear, doubt, or some awful event—the sun is gone. My faith is gone.

Lord Jesus, forgive me. How fickle I must seem to you. How utterly swayed by what seems real in the moment. Forgive me. Heal this in me.

I take some comfort in the rest of Elijah's story. Before praying up a rainstorm, he called down fire from heaven and had 450 prophets of Baal put to the sword. It hadn't rained for three years, yet that afternoon he called in a monsoon. Then he ran for his life from his enemies. God found him on a mountain in a mood of almost total unbelief.

"What are you doing here, Elijah?"

He replied, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.'" (1 Kings 19:9–10)

It was all gone. There was no fire from heaven. There was no rain. It was all gone.

Maybe we're not so different after all.

"My Love"

Often as I move through my day and through my week, I'll turn my heart and my thoughts toward God simply to ask him, *What are you saying, Lord?* It's a way of checking in, giving God the opportunity to speak into whatever is going on, or to say whatever it is he might need to say to me. Driving down the road, sitting in a meeting, or taking out the trash, I ask, *What are you saying, Lord?* I'm just checking in. Paul says, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25). I suppose this is my attempt to keep in step.

For the past two months at least, what God has been saying

in return is *My love*. Every time I've stopped to listen, I've heard, *My love*. Over and over again, *My love*. And I've wondered why. When there are so many things going on in the world and in my life, so many things I know I need to hear from him, still he says to me, *My love*.

I haven't really known what to do with this. At first it was a comfort. What a wonderful thing to hear. My heart would sort of soften and say, Yes, your love. Thank you for your love. But after several weeks of this—we're talking months now—it began to bug me. That's it? The same thing? Your love? What, am I an idiot or something? Am I even hearing right? Why are you saying the same thing over and over?

After I got through that phase, God's words began to be a great source of comfort and orientation. They have brought me back again and again to his love. Right. This is all about your love. If I get nothing more, no further explanation, I'm okay with that. I can just sit with *My love*. But to be honest, I still don't think I'm getting it. God is repeating this for a reason. I do get that. But I'm not really sure why. It seems he's after something.